Northwest Math Sightings – Seasonal Math

Students in our math classes legitimately ask us sometimes, “When will I ever need to know this stuff?” It’s a question that has many answers depending on who has asked the question and why. Over the years good teachers develop a skill at fishing out the response that will work for this or that student at this or that moment. Sometimes it concerns an application in “real life,” sometimes it has to do with requirements for the next course down the curricular line, or for tests the student must pass and so forth. My favorite answer, though, is this: “When you understand this math your life will be more interesting. Let me explain…”

It’s the beginning of the new school year and it’s my morning to drive in the carpool. At 7:20 am I turn from our street onto an arterial headed uphill and facing east. Immediately I’m blinded as the rays of the rising sun blast straight down the road and through my windshield. Ten minutes earlier the sun was below the horizon created by the hill and ten minutes from now it will be comfortably above so that the visor will be useful, but right now the sun glares right down the road, making driving hazardous and left turns across oncoming traffic nearly impossible.

This happens every year at about this time and then again in the spring on our east-west and north-south grid of streets. The rising and setting sun glares directly at you in the morning as you head east and in the evening as you head west. Our perennial overcast generally means we don’t notice the alignment but this morning the clouds were gone and I did. It reminded me of shortening days and the coming of fall with winter waiting in the wings. Sunrise this morning, according to the newspaper took place at 6:36am. Tomorrow it will be at 6:37am. By the autumnal equinox, September 23rd this year, we will be losing nearly three and a half minutes of sunlight every day. By December 22, the winter solstice, we will have to wait until very nearly 8am to see the sun and it will dip below the horizon at 4:21pm.

Whenever we quantify our world, math is there. Quantification makes comparison possible and comparison invites analysis. It is this analysis that leads to understanding (or the satisfying illusion of understanding anyway) and so gives a reason to study math. In the present circumstance, we can keep track of how the photoperiod (the length of time the sun spends above the horizon on any given day) changes as the seasons slip by. When we graph the photoperiod against the days of the year we get a curve that looks pretty familiar. Put a couple of years together and we’re pretty sure there’s something trigonometric going on.